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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KU](#) [FREEDOM](#) [AGENDA](#)
SUBJECT: ELECTION COUNTDOWN: KUWAITI CANDIDATES REPRESENT
A BROAD SPECTRUM AND DEFY NEAT CATEGORIZATION

REF: A. KUWAIT 2446
[1](#)B. KUWAIT 2419
[1](#)C. KUWAIT 2150

Classified By: CDA Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary and Comment: Two hundred and fifty-two candidates will compete in Kuwait's National Assembly elections on June 29. Over 340,000 voters will go to 91 polling stations between 8:00 am and 8:00 pm to elect two representatives from each of 25 electoral districts. Fifty-seven percent of the voters and 27 of the candidates are women, and will be voting for the first time in a national election since they won full political rights in [1](#)2005. Observers often divide the candidates into a number of categories: reformist vs. pro-government; liberal vs. Islamist; tribal vs. urban; service deputy vs. principles deputy; etc. The range of candidates shows that people are taking advantage of the considerable freedom of expression that exists in Kuwait. Tribal candidates, liberals, service deputies, and women make for a colorful array of choices on Election Day but many of the candidates resist easy categorization. Analysis of the outcome will require a nuanced look at the array of Deputies to emerge from the election. End Summary and Comment.

Shoo-ins

[1](#)3. (C) There are a number of candidates whose election is considered virtually guaranteed. Abdullah Al-Fahma and Marzouq Al-Hbaini were chosen by their tribe (the Awazim) in illegal election primaries to represent the 25th election district, located in an outlying area south of Kuwait City. Since approximately 70% of the district's population is from the same tribe, and since it is taken for granted that most tribal (as opposed to "urban") voters vote according to their tribe, these candidates are considered to be unbeatable. EmbOffs visited the opening night of the candidates, fourth joint election headquarters. PolOff sat next to former MP Mashaan Al-Azmi (1999 - 2003) who lost in the 2003 primaries. Far from being bitter about his loss, he was sitting prominently in the front row and supporting his tribe. After asking about a visa for his friend, he predicted women would have no effect since Awazim vote with the tribe, with the implication that the tribe had decided on Al-Fahma and Al-Hbaini. The main issue in this election campaign, he said, was the government writing off loans to Kuwaiti citizens. He acknowledged that Hbaini was from the Popular Bloc, a group of five MPs who do not follow the liberal, Islamist, or pro-government strains, and that Fahma was a "service deputy". Thus, while tribal affiliation seems likely to carry the day, the tribe had chosen candidates from clearly distinct political strains. Despite Al-Azmi's comments about women, female tribal candidate Laila Al-Rashed

separately told EmbOff that she had an easier time of campaigning than her urban counterparts because she had an automatic support base in her tribe.

¶4. (C) Other candidates expected to win are former speaker Jassem Al-Khorafi and former chair of the foreign relations committee Mohammed Jassem Al-Sager. They have waged different campaign styles which have been well received by their supporters. Al-Khorafi, seeking to be re-elected as speaker, is from one of Kuwait's richest families and enjoys close relations with the Government. Yet he capitalized on the reformist spirit of this election season by breaking with tradition and criticizing the royal family. Al-Sager has campaigned heavily on the need for reform and has threatened not to run for election in 2010 if Parliament fails to seriously address redistricting. He has reached out to women, holding mixed and women-only events for them and including several in his campaign activities.

¶5. (C) Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanim, born in 1968, has a strong chance as a first time challenger. His pedigree is well known -- Al-Khorafi is his uncle, his mother served as the Dean of Kuwait University, his father was head of the Kuwait Chamber of Commerce, and another uncle is a multi-millionaire international businessman -- giving him instant recognition. He has encouraged respected academics, activists, and former government officials to speak on the issues of the day at his campaign tent and featured live webcasts of the forums (www.marzouq-alghanim.net/live) to attract tech-savvy younger voters. Al-Ghanim is expected to be a pro-government deputy.

Women Live the Scene at Liberal Headquarters

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¶6. (C) Liberal outgoing MP Basil Al-Rashid has slick campaign posters featuring an orange handprint, orange being the color of the reform movement and the five fingers representing reformers, goal of reducing the number of electoral districts from 25 to five. On a recent evening his large tent was filled with a section of uniformly dressed men and a slightly bigger section of colorfully-clad women. In contrast to the men stoically listening to Al-Rashid and occasionally sneaking uncomfortable glances toward the women's section, the women were buzzing with excitement. Female campaign workers, many with hijab and some without, wore bright orange scarves with the candidate's name and greeted attendees as they arrived. Al-Rashid, who made waves earlier in the week with harsh criticism of Iran, railed against corruption in a very polished political performance. He was followed on the stage by Islamist former MP and candidate Nasser Al-Sane, who has united with Al-Rashid in the push to reduce the number of constituencies. The attendees were not all Westernized liberals: a bearded young man outside quoted numerous Koranic verses and used the cadence of a Friday sermon to urge LES Political Specialist into giving up smoking.

Some Races to Watch

¶7. (C) Several women are running high-profile campaigns in races that will be closely watched. Aisha Al-Reshaid, who launched her campaign in 2005 shortly after the women's suffrage vote, is running in a conservative district against well known former MPs. Her campaign has garnered daily press attention not only for her outspoken style, but also because of threats made and damage to her posters. Many Kuwaitis believe that she is secretly backed by several members of the ruling family and her electoral success would not come as a surprise, although few would believe that any win was based on merit. Another candidate believed to have secret Al-Sabah support is former Assistant Undersecretary of Tourism Nabila Al-Anjari. She has a slight advantage over other women in that many Kuwaitis believe that because of her previous

Government experience, she is better prepared to work in the male-dominated National Assembly. Dr. Fatima Al-Abdali, a Kuwait Oil Company executive, has built a steady following of both women and men over the past month. In addition to having a well-defined campaign and reading poetry she has composed, she has visited schools, charitable organizations, hospitals and diwanis to meet with constituents. In her final seminar before a co-ed audience, she compared the views of men and women on issues ranging from health to Gulf security and argued that women in Parliament would be good for the Kuwaiti family. Both men and women have been impressed with her intelligence, vision, and commitment, and appreciate her calm demeanor and that she wears a hijab, commenting that she is a good representative of Kuwaiti womanhood. There has been no mention that she also comes from Kuwait's Shi'a minority community.

¶8. (C) In the fifth district, liberal former MP Ali Al-Rashid, who headed the human rights committee and is a strong supporter of women's rights and fighting corruption, faces off against Salafi former MP and Justice Minister Ahmad Baqer, a staunch opponent of women's voting rights, and Anwar Jawad Bukhamseen, the son of an ultra rich Shi'a businessman. In the previous parliament, Baqer and Al-Rashid, who represent opposite ends of the ideological spectrum in Kuwait, represented the district. However, both were considered leaders of the reform movement, which has created strange bedfellows. The district could show itself to be completely unpredictable by ousting one of them in favor of a traditional pro-government candidate like Bukhamseen.

The Longshots

¶9. (C) Kuwait Economic Society head Dr. Rola Dashti, a leader of the charge for women's rights and strong backer of many of the social status issues introduced to the current debate is not favored to win. She is running against several well known candidates, including five other women. Also, for many voters she is not considered sufficiently Kuwaiti. She is a controversial personality and for this conservative society is viewed as "too American." Most importantly, she speaks Lebanese rather than Kuwaiti Arabic (her mother is Lebanese) and her closest supporters say this will cost her the race. A man at a male candidate's diwaniya had a different interpretation of why she would lose. He asked: "how many females have been elected to other Arab parliaments where there are no quotas? Middle Eastern societies just do

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not want female leaders."

¶10. (C) Dr. Saad Bin Tefla, a strong Post contact who interpreted for George H.W. Bush when he visited the Kuwaiti Parliament for the first time after the liberation from Iraq, is an outspoken liberal Shi'a and a former Minister of Information. Dr. Saad, who among other projects has produced his own English-Arabic dictionary of democracy terms, set up his headquarters only a few blocks from the U.S. Embassy. He will probably fall victim to two of the following: pro-government MP Muhammad Al-Mulaifi; Hassan Jowhar, a Shi'a Islamist; and Salafi Allam Al-Kandari.

A Snowball's Chance...

¶11. (C) PolChief visited June 25 a seminar hosted by female candidate Taiba Al-Ibrahim. The 78-year-old Al-Ibrahim, who has already raised eyebrows by declaring herself an atheist, addressed a religiously conservative mixed audience of 200 and argued that citizens should be free to worship as they please, but states should be secular. While some of the men questioned whether she wanted Kuwait to be like Turkey or Tunisia, her remarks on politics and piety and attempts by some to use the latter to subjugate women drew applause. The

large crowd is not a reflection on her support base. Several attendees told PolChief they did not live in Al-Ibrahim's district and were simply visiting various campaign tents and seminars out of curiosity. Al-Ibrahim's candidacy is indicative of the freedom of expression enjoyed by activists and the widespread interest in what candidates have to say.

¶12. (C) Two blocks from the U.S. Embassy, a candidate who made a fortune in the slaughterhouse business held a campaign event on June 25. If elected, he would be a typical "service deputy," helping constituents get jobs and complete various transactions requiring wasta ("connections" or "influence"). As grilled meats, salads, and desserts were laid before EmbOffs, Muhammad Al-Hfaiti, the Clown Prince of Kuwaiti electoral politics, sat down. This Oklahoma-educated veterinarian has run half-serious election campaigns a number of times. His events have traditionally been some of the best-attended in Kuwait because of his wit, though the 35 votes he got in 2003 was actually an improvement from previous years. Religious fundamentalists scared him into abandoning his campaign this year because he had called for legalizing alcohol. Hfaiti told Poloff "how many people drink every weekend in the states, 45%? I personally know that here in Kuwait it's 75%!"

"Fundamentalist" Candidate

¶13. (SBU) Poloff ended a recent night of election headquarters visits at the tent of Allam Al-Kandari, who is being supported by the Salafi movement. The speeches had ended, and attendees lounged with their tea. Many crowded around the big-screen television to watch the World Cup. While Al-Kandari favors the long beard and traditional clothes of a religious conservative, his brother is a Western-educated liberal. He currently serves as Assistant Undersecretary at the Ministry of Health for legal affairs and told Poloff at an earlier meeting that he hated the traditional Kuwaiti dishdasha, but could not wear a suit in his current position. Despite his liberal outlook, he and a group of other liberal friends explained that although candidate Al-Kandari was an "Islamist," he was flexible and willing to listen rather than just shout. As further proof of the night's dichotomy, a young boy walked by in a shirt that read "Wanted: Meaningful Overnight Relationship" as a 20-something sporting a beard meant to convey piety, but whose pathetic thinness mostly just accentuated his youth, repeatedly invoked the prophet Mohammad in relating his efforts to get a British visa.

Kuwaiti Candidates Resist Categorization

¶14. (C) Comment: This brief tour of the candidates shows both the range of opinions Kuwaiticandidates represent, as well as the difficulty of categorizing candidates. The two tribal candidates, who should be swept into office without serious competition based on their tribal affiliation, belong to decidedly different parts of the Kuwaiti political spectrum. Fundamentalists scared off the pro-alcohol candidate, yet liberals were found shmoozing at a Salafi's tent. And while most people think they know how women will vote this year, no one can be quite sure. Most of the candidates are proud of their pro-American views, so while

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the election could affect the GOK's approach to domestic and family issues, it poses little prospect of disrupting the grass-roots strength of the bilateral relationship. End Comment.

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